

Asian Dope Boys Are the Shanghai-Based Multi-Disciplinary Troupe Creating Boundary-Pushing Performance Art

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Collectively known as the Asian Dope Boys, the Shanghai-based, multi-disciplinary troupe creates performance art that straddles the beautiful and the bizarre. Last year they took a sampling of their absurdist theatrics on the road, touring the full 20-person opera through Europe, with dates at the Barbican in London, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, and Säule, the experimental space at Berghain, Berlin's legendary techno club. For the performance at Säule, Yu Han, a founding member, gripped a oversized disco ball-cum-mask; his fellow artist Beio Mao, was naked and painted entirely white, a bamboo conical hat on his head and stacks of gold bangles on his wrists. Between two towering concrete pillars, they performed their own variation of Butoh, the avant-garde Japanese dance theater.

Hovering in the shadows, stage left at show, was Tianzhuo Chen, the director of Asian Dope Boys. Even on this small scale, it's clear that Chen has choreographed a transgressive ceremony of sorts, a tribute to club culture rituals that draws on Hindu, Tibetan Buddhist, and traditional Chinese aesthetics. Carefully interwoven within this lurid multiverse is iconography of the animal kingdom, drag culture, and Western pop culture. In the past, Chen has cited the holy demons within Tibetan Buddhist paintings known as Thangka as the starting point for his creative visions. Indeed Mao often appears unisex as a nod to the Chinese deities. In Chen's "An Atypical Brain Damage" performance, two Vietnamese twin performers, Le Ngoc Thanh and Le Duc Hai, wear Justin Bieber-designed tracksuits purchased from H&M to represent "capitalism and super star."

PhoCourtesy of Tianzhou Chen

I meet Chen at a modest hotel bar on a chilly January afternoon in Berlin's Neukölln neighborhood. Between sips of pilsner, Chen admits that he started the project out of frustration with China's conservative art world. "Being an artist, you have to follow the rules. It's not as free as most people think, because you still need to make work to sell—works that look nice in rich people's living rooms sell better," he says, blinking behind gold-rimmed glasses. "Asian Dope Boys is my alter ego, because I always wanted to be a musician, but never felt like I could do it." Fresh off a plane from Thailand, the 35-year-old provocateur speaks with the weary monotone that comes with jet lag. He's thrown his jacket—an oversized red and gold letterman with pastel fleece panels, purchased in Japan's Harajuku District—onto the chair next to him. "I don't have a big mission. I just want to make fun parties for all the kids in China," he says, offering me a strawberry mint that vaguely resembles a pressed pill.

Chen's career encompasses fashion, performance, and video art, and spans cities across China and Europe. In 2014, he stumbled across the Western producers who would later soundtrack the ADB parties and performances, including Switzerland-born Nepalese-Tibetan musician Aisha Devi and multi-instrumentalist Yves Tumor. He met Yu Han during a stint with London clothing label

Sankuanz around the same time, and cast him several months later, alongside Beio Mao and French dancer Ylva Falk, in the kitschy, Pepto-Bismol-tinged video piece “19:53.” Asian Dope Boys was officially formed shortly thereafter in 2015, with a series of parties in Beijing, Shanghai, and



Shenzhen. Now ADP have become the leaders of a new performance art movement, with surrealist multimedia productions such as “Aetherave” and “An Atypical Brain Damage.” Falk’s Paris-based collective, House of Drama, has joined their ranks, too, as have outsider electronic artists such as Aisha Devi, now a longterm collaborator of Chen’s, and Berlin-based experimental producer Dis Fig.

“With Tianzhuo, it was complete freedom and punk,” says Falk who met Chen at an after-party following her performance in 2014 at the Modern Art Museum in Beijing. Unlike her high fashion collaborators, Asian Dope Boys affords her “the space [to] push myself and my boundaries instead of toning myself down...” she tells me. Mao agrees. “It embodies a good conversation between close friends. It’s fun, thought provoking, and without an ounce of shame or embarrassment.”

Naturally, Asian Dope Boys club nights play host to a cadre of other eccentric characters. Among them, artist and producer Shanmin Wu, who goes by the moniker 33EMYBW. “I get inspiration from insects,” says Wu who often wears beaded facial ornaments reminiscent of bug-like lateral eyes. “I connect my music to arthropods because they all have a biological and mechanical aesthetic.” Before meeting Chen and performing a live set at the now-shuttered venue Shelter, she had never played music in a club setting. In fact Asian Dope Boys were among the first promoters to introduce left field electronic music to Shanghai. Three years later and the underground scene is booming. DJs from local labels Genome 6.66Mbp and SVBKVLT spin on rotation along with the steady stream of Western imports.

“People dress pretty crazy, so our party is almost cosplay-level,” Chen says borrowing words from Gaz Williams, the co-owner of All Club in Shanghai, a popular ADP hangout. He pulls up an image

from the niche @chinaclubmemes Instagram account to illustrate the point. The “before” panel shows Kermit the Frog on his lonesome; the bottom panel features a bunch of multicolored Muppets festooned in gold sequins and feathered wigs, and is captioned “after going to Asian Dope Boys Party once.” Says Chen chuckling, “This sums it up.”

Photo: Rita / Courtesy of Tianzhou Chen